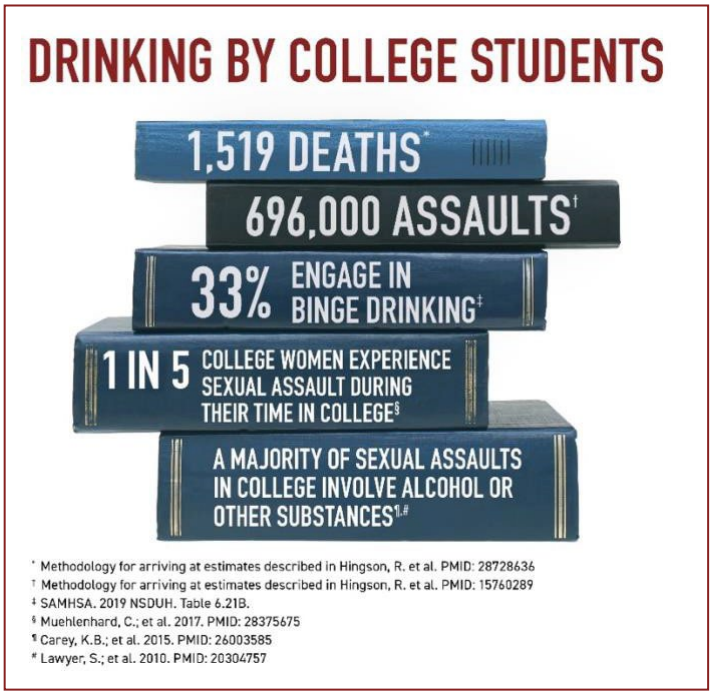
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

# Fall Semester—A Time for Parents To Discuss the Risks of College Drinking

As college students arrive on campus this fall, it is typically a time of new experiences, new friendships, and making memories that will last a lifetime. Unfortunately for many, it is also a time of harmful and underage drinking and of dealing with its aftermath—from vandalism, sexual assault, and other forms of violence to injuries and death.

## Rates and Consequences of College Drinking

According to the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 52.5 percent of full-time college students ages 18 to 22 drank alcohol in the past month, and 33.0 percent engaged in binge drinking in the past month. NSDUH defines binge drinking as 5 or more drinks on an occasion for men and 4 or more drinks on an occasion for women.* In addition, 8.2 percent engaged in heavy alcohol use (defined by NSDUH as binge drinking on 5 or more days in the past month). These binge drinking and heavy alcohol use rates are both higher than for those not attending college.[1]


DRINKING BY COLLEGE STUDENTS
1,519 DEATHS*
696,000 ASSAULTS†
33% ENGAGE IN BINGE DRINKING‡
1 IN 5 COLLEGE WOMEN EXPERIENCE SEXUAL ASSAULT DURING THEIR TIME IN COLLEGE§
A MAJORITY OF SEXUAL ASSAULTS IN COLLEGE INVOLVE ALCOHOL OR OTHER SUBSTANCES¶#
* Methodology for arriving at estimates described in Hingson, R. et al. PMID: 28728636
† Methodology for arriving at estimates described in Hingson, R. et al. PMID: 15760289
‡ SAMHSA. 2019 NSDUH. Table 6.21B.
§ Muehlenhard, C.; et al. 2017. PMID: 28375675
¶ Carey, K.B.; et al. 2015. PMID: 26003585
# Lawyer, S.; et al. 2010. PMID: 20304757

The consequences of harmful and underage drinking by college students are more significant, more destructive, and more costly than many parents realize. And these consequences affect students whether they drink or not. Researchers estimate that each year:

- Deaths: 1,519 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, including motor vehicle crashes.[2]
- Assaults: 696,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 are assaulted by another student who has been drinking.[3]
- Sexual Assaults: Although estimating the number of alcohol-related sexual assaults is exceptionally challenging—since sexual assault is typically underreported—researchers have confirmed a long-standing finding that 1 in 5 college women experience sexual assault during their time in college.[4] A majority of sexual assaults in college involve alcohol or other substances.[5,6] Research continues in order to better understand the relationships between alcohol and sexual assault among college students. Additional national survey data are needed to better estimate the number of alcohol-related assaults.
- Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD): Roughly 9 percent of college students meet the criteria for AUD.[7]
- Academic Consequences: About 1 in 4 college students report academic consequences from drinking, including missing class, falling behind in class, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades overall.[8]

## Early Weeks Are Critical

Although some students come to college already having some experience with alcohol, certain aspects of college life, such as unstructured time, the widespread availability of alcohol, inconsistent enforcement of underage drinking laws, and limited interactions with parents and other adults, can intensify the problem.

The first 6 weeks of freshman year are a vulnerable time for harmful and underage college drinking and for alcohol-related consequences because of student expectations and social pressures at the start of the academic year. The coronavirus pandemic will create additional stress and uncertainty this fall, so support for students will be critical.

## Parents Can Help

An often-overlooked protective factor involves the continuing influence of parents during the college years. Research shows that students who abstain from drinking often do so because their parents discussed alcohol use and its adverse consequences with them. During these crucial early weeks, parents can do a number of things to stay involved.

Parents can help by:

- Talking with students about the dangers of harmful and underage college drinking—such as the possible legal and school penalties for underage drinking, and the risks of alcohol overdose, unintentional injuries, violence, unsafe sexual behavior, academic failure, and other adverse consequences.
- Reaching out periodically and keeping the lines of communication open while staying alert for possible alcohol-related problems.
- Reminding students to feel free to reach out to them to share information about their daily activities and to ask for help if needed.
- Learning about the school's alcohol prevention and emergency intervention efforts as well as the school's policies and procedures in place this fall for the coronavirus pandemic. (See "Resources Are Available" below.)
- Making sure students know the signs of alcohol overdose or an alcohol-related problem, and how to help.

## Resources Are Available

For parents who want to discuss the consequences of drinking with their college students, a variety of helpful resources are available from NIAAA at https://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov.

These resources include a parents' guide that offers research-based information plus helpful advice on choosing the right college, staying involved during freshman year, and getting assistance if faced with an alcohol-related crisis. The website also provides links to alcohol policies at colleges across the country, an interactive diagram of how alcohol affects the human body, and an interactive alcohol cost calculator.

Additionally, NIAAA's *CollegeAIM*—the *College Alcohol Intervention Matrix,* available at https://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/CollegeAIM—is a booklet and website that helps schools and parents address harmful and underage student drinking by identifying effective alcohol interventions.

## For more information, please visit: https://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov


[1] SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Table 6.21B—Types of Illicit Drug, Tobacco Product, and Alcohol Use in Past Month among Persons Aged 18 to 22, by College Enrollment Status and Gender: Percentages, 2018 and 2019. https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29394/NSDUHDetailedTabs2019/NSDUHDetTabsSect6pe2019.htm#tab6-21b. Accessed December 8, 2020.

[2] Methodology for arriving at estimates described in Hingson, R.; Zha, W.; and Smyth, D. Magnitude and trends in heavy episodic drinking, alcohol-impaired driving, and alcohol-related mortality and overdose hospitalizations among emerging adults of college ages 18–24 in the United States, 1998–2014. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 78(4):540–548, 2017. PMID: 28728636

[3] Methodology for arriving at estimates described in Hingson, R.; Heeren, T.; Winter, M.; et al. Magnitude of alcohol-related mortality and morbidity among U.S. college students ages 18–24: Changes from 1998 to 2001. *Annual Review of Public Health* 26:259–279, 2005. PMID: 15760289

[4] Muehlenhard, C.; Peterson, Z.; Humphreys, T.; Jozkowski, K. Evaluating the one-in-five statistic: Women's risk of sexual assault while in college. *The Journal of Sex Research* 54(4–5):549–576, 2017. PMID: 28375675

[5] Carey, K.B.; Durney, S.E.; Shepardson, R.L.; Carey, M.P. Incapacitated and forcible rape of college women: Prevalence across the first year. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 56(6):678–80, 2015. PMID: 26003585

[6] Lawyer, S.; Resnick, H.; Bakanic, V.; Burkett, T.; Kilpatrick, D. Forcible, drug-facilitated, and incapacitated rape and sexual assault among undergraduate women. *Journal of American College Health* 58(5):453–460, 2010. PMID: 20304757

[7] SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Table 6.23B—Alcohol Use Disorder in Past Year among Persons Aged 18 to 22, by College Enrollment Status and Demographic Characteristics: Percentages, 2018 and 2019. https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29394/NSDUHDetailedTabs2019/NSDUHDetTabsSect6pe2019.htm#tab6-23b. Accessed October 1, 2020.

[8] Wechsler, H.; Dowdall, G.W.; Maenner, G.; et al. Changes in binge drinking and related problems among American college studen ts between 1993 and 1997: Results of the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study. *Journal of American College Health* 47(2):57–68, 1998. PMID: 9782661